

THE BOSTON INFORMER

No. 123

The newsletter for people who care about Boston

November 2019

Farewell Issue

This is the final issue of The Boston Informer, the newsletter for people who care about Boston. After 27 years (who does anything for 27 years anymore?!) we are shutting down, closing up and packing it in. The good news is we aren't laying off dozens of dedicated, hard-working women and men, just the three of us: Anne, Tony and Chris. For over 27 years The Boston Informer was the "watchdog on the waterfront," as the Boston Tab put it, reporting on serious matters and spoofing absurdities of Boston development.

History of The Boston Informer

We published the first issue of The Boston Informer in March 1992. Boston was entering a period of unprecedented activity and disruption, and people were curious and nervous. They wanted an independent and trusted interpretation of what was happening. The \$15 billion, 16-year Central Artery/Tunnel (CA/T) project was about to begin; transformative development at Fan Pier and Pier 4 was on the table again, promising millions of square feet of development; the decrepit Northern Avenue Bridge was being supplanted by the adjacent Evelyn Moakley Bridge; and the recession was over, lighting a fire under developers. People wanted to know what was going on in their neighborhoods.

Key fact: the Internet was not widely used in 1992. Websites for everything from MBTA schedules to salad dressing were years away. People wanted to know what's going on without having to go to community meetings every night or read 10 neighborhood newspapers. In 1991 when Chris, management consultant and waterfront resident, became the answer man for waterfront issues, he sensed a need to put it all down in a newsletter. He approached consultants with whom he had worked, Tony, architect and landscape architect, and Anne, transportation planner, and the Informer was born.

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The Boston Informer Context

The Informer started publishing at a turning point in Boston. William Weld was governor, the first Republican since Francis Sargent in 1975. Republicans would hold the governor's office until 2007. Change was imminent in the City of Boston, too, as Mayor Flynn was wrapping up nine years in office. The Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) was not seen as the City's development and planning agency, just a powerful quasi-independent agency that pushed development. The mercurial BRA head Stephen Coyle was gone (he led the Authority for eight years), replaced with Paul Barrett for 18 months.

The state's transportation agencies were preparing for the start of the CA/T project that would strain everything for years. The MBTA was led by a transit professional, John Haley, who hung in for four years. Richard Taylor was about halfway through his two-year tenure as transportation secretary; his successor, James Kerasiotes, would serve five years and then serve time in prison

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These Outlasted The Informer

If there's one thing we all know, it's that City Hall and the State House don't mind doing study after study, holding design competitions, planning and programming, designing and redesigning. Making a decision and implementing a plan are often elusory. Residents and others waste countless hours as agencies drag people out to attend meetings and study revised studies and plans. Agency staff change every few years, so almost everything is new to them while the public is subjected to more of the same. Maybe agencies should reimburse members of the public for the time spent at meetings, studying plans, writing comments and deciphering gibberish for something they know is not going to happen....

These projects and studies provided The Boston Informer with endless copy for decades:

- MBTA Red Line/Blue Line Connector
- MBTA North-South connection
- East Boston Piers Park 2
- City Hall Plaza makeover
- New Northern Avenue Bridge
- Central Artery/Tunnel debt
- South Station tower and air rights
- Transit in the Seaport District

The good news is some of these projects will advance this year (e.g., Piers Park) and will be built soon.

1994



1994: William Weld was governor, Tom Menino was in year 1 of his 20-year reign as mayor, and a public/private collaboration ran the "City Hall Ideas Competition" to "reshape and revitalize City Hall Plaza." Dozens of ideas were submitted, including a 300-room hotel, an airport ticketing facility and a music garden proposed by cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Nothing has happened. Seth Feinberg captures the public's feeling of hopelessness.

for tax fraud.

The look of Boston was changing, too. The highway ramps obliterating Charlestown's historic City Square were put in tunnels in 1993. Development at City Square and in the former Navy Yard accelerated after the highway was removed. The potential for similar change downtown after the CA/T was clear.

Unique, groundbreaking newsletter

The Informer was unlike any other news source in Boston. As an independent, ad-free publication, the Informer was never influenced by corporate pressure. Short and to-the-point news and features typically answered a question such as, "What is that building going up there?" or, "Whatever happened to the longer Blue Line cars we were supposed to get?" No long and boring articles with useless quotes from bureaucrats taking up space.

As "watchdogs," the Informer reported on things the mainstream media didn't have the time, resources or history to cover. Examples include facts about Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway parcels and the real amount of park space the CA/T was creating; the BRA's decades of miscues with proposals for the Hub Ticket parcel next to the Wilbur Theater; and the contradictory and plain wrong harbor planning assertions by the BRA. And unlike most media, the Informer followed-up on stories, holding agencies and developers accountable.

The Informer's "educational" and historical features were famous and generated scores of "Oh, so that's what that means!" Favorites include the inventory of Boston plans back to 1965; CA/T by the numbers; Hinge Block visions, analysis of 2006 Transportation Finance Commission findings; air rights realities; and urban design primer.

Finally, we did not take ourselves too seriously. In addition to cartoons and irony, we published an annual April Fools' issue, The Boston MisInformer, that poked fun at everyone.



Key periods and events for the Informer

Over 27 years, a lot has changed in Boston...and a lot has not. Early years of the Informer covered all aspects of the CA/T including analyses of the Surface Artery roadway and park design. We covered development in the Seaport, waterfront and Back Bay and the MBTA's new Silver Line busway in the South End and Seaport. These projects were completed.

We also wasted a lot of ink on plans, policies and projects that went nowhere. Air rights development over the MassPike may happen this year, over 20 years after guidelines were created and Columbus Center was proposed. We're still waiting for real water transportation, City Hall Plaza to be transformed, South Station air rights, coordinated land use and transportation planning by the City, and ventilation improvements at Back Bay station.

Why are we ceasing publication

When the Informer first published, keeping up on projects in your neighborhood was a chore. Now, the Internet provides free access to everything, and agencies use websites to regularly post information. And the nature of reporting has changed. The Informer went after "the story behind the story," but there are now fewer contacts and sources willing to help with that aspect.

The Internet is one of the greatest inventions ever, but time will reveal how it will end up changing general knowledge and savvy. The Internet provides the information specifically sought out but may not provide the information really needed. The Informer tried to get you the information needed.

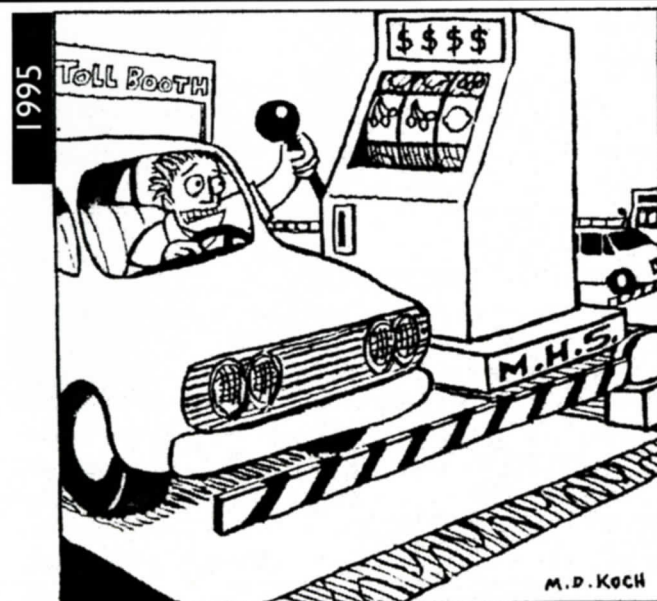
We had a ball publishing the Informer! Thank you to all our subscribers, contributors, sources, guest columnists, illustrators, printers and readers for 27 years.

Central Artery Finances Under Scrutiny

As a "product" of the Central Artery/Tunnel (CA/T) project, The Boston Informer covered the project's financial highs and lows extensively. With William Weld as governor and James Kerasiotes as his Secretary of Transportation, the ballooning cost of the Central Artery/Tunnel project were straining the Commonwealth's finances. The Metropolitan Highway System was hatched in 1994 as a way for the state to pay for its share of the CA/T.

Under pressure from the Federal highway Administration to prepare a financing plan, the Metropolitan Highway System was set up to be run by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority. The Turnpike Authority would buy the Tobin Bridge from Massport and operate the Turnpike Extension, Sumner and Callahan tunnels, Ted Williams Tunnel, Charlestown's Central Artery North Area and new depressed Central Artery. Legislation creating the Metropolitan Highway System would not be passed until late 1996 with a stop-gap Ted Williams Tunnel financing bill enacted to give the new tunnel to the Turnpike Authority in exchange for \$100 million.

The CA/T project's finances got murkier in 1997 and 1998. It became clear that massive borrowing would be needed to cover project costs not paid for by the federal government. The eventual revelation of \$1.4 billion in cost overruns would lead The Boston Informer to try to be helpful with revenue-raising suggestions including naming rights for just about everything, slot machines at toll plazas and allowing (and charging for) parking on the new Greenway.



Central Artery/Tunnel finances were big news in 1995. "Revision 6" of the CA/T costs came in at \$8 billion plus \$1 billion of unfunded costs the Project assigned to others to pay. The Metropolitan Highway System—first suggested in 1995 to transfer the CA/T project to the Turnpike—was proposed and debated and finally passed in late 1996.

THE BOSTON INFORMER

FAREWELL

November 13, 2019

To our faithful readers,

This is the last issue of The Boston Informer. When we first published The Boston Informer 27 years ago, we provided short articles about new development, transportation and planning projects in downtown Boston. It was hard for residents and workers to find out about and keep up with what was going, so the Informer "provided the big picture of Boston." The Informer evolved over time to include longer articles on topics of current interest along with short new items, published four times per year plus the reader favorite "April Fools" issue.

Now, with instant electronic news widely available from a variety of sources, it's a lot easier to find out what is being built on that parcel or what the MBTA is thinking about for the Seaport. The Boston Informer did a great job helping people navigate planning and construction activities for over 25 years, but the phones in our pockets give us better, more timely access now. Justice Hugo Black said, "In revealing the workings of government that led to the Vietnam War, the newspapers nobly did precisely that which the Founders hoped and trusted they would do." We hope you think The Boston Informer also did some good along the way.

Thank you for your attention and support.

Chris Fincham
Anne McKinnon
Tony Casendino



April Fools' Greatest Hits

April Fools' Day will never be the same.

For much of the 21st century April Fools' Day was celebrated by the news media. Fake front pages, spoof ads and crazy editorials. But sadly, the media over time worried readers wouldn't trust the publication and its credibility would suffer. Never a concern at The Boston Informer. We produced the annual Boston MisInformer issue every April Fools' Day that fundamentally pointed out how ridiculous Boston and Massachusetts development, planning, non-planning and politics really is.

We were lucky to have great projects that lent themselves to spoofing. They say "there's a grain of truth in every joke," so the Boston MisInformer must have been making a point.

City Hall Plaza – A perennial MisInformer favorite, the saga of "transforming City Hall Plaza" engulfed three mayors, with Menino suffering the most. The MisInformer always offered helpful suggestions for turning the barren space of 1.8 million bricks into an urban oasis.

With a nod to Madrid's Atocha train station, an Informer solution to barren City Hall Plaza was a big tent covering the whole thing. With plenty of room for vendors and hot air from City Hall, this proposal proved a hotel on the Plaza would not be necessary to fund upkeep as some "experts" had insisted.

Central Artery/Tunnel Project – With so many planning, design and funding issues, the Big Dig provided endless hours of amusement. From the infamous Scheme Z proposal to cross the Charles River to the creation of the Metropolitan Highway System to pay for the project, there was lots of good copy. April Fools' always included revenue-raising schemes from the MisInformer.

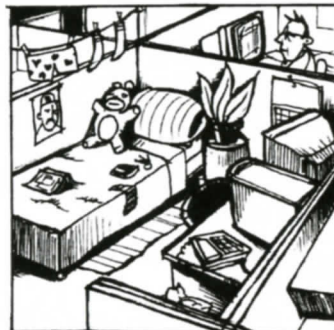
Boston's short-lived Olympics fantasy was a crushing disappointment to the MisInformer. We were counting on years of "can you believe this" articles and had only one April Fools' issue before the City's Olympic dreams evaporated. Boston's slogan, "Compact Games in a Compact City," led to ideas for new Olympic events.



Speed texting and Double-Dutch jump roping were ideal new events for a compact Boston 2024 Olympics.



The **housing crisis** in the Boston region is no joke. But some of Boston's proposed solutions over the years have been funny. Boston's zoning regulations used to prohibit dwelling units smaller than 450 s.f., but when "micro-units" became all housing experts could talk about, Mayor Menino jumped on board for the Seaport District. The MisInformer took it a step further and came up with a solution that converted office cubicles into live-work spaces.



Micro-units do double duty.

Boston's transportation problem went from "how do we survive the Central Artery/Tunnel construction" 25 years ago to a full-blown crisis today. Perennial complaints about funding and ineffective "solutions" encouraged us to propose our own dumb solutions.



Hubway bike share partners with Boston Barge Co.

From slot machines on MBTA platforms to charging to use escalators, the MisInformer floated numerous revenue-raising ideas. And our ideas for bikes in the city were way ahead of any Administration...

A Rube Goldberg solution for **speeding access from Back Bay** hotels to the new So. Boston convention center actually gained traction in 1999.



City and state officials proposed a "slingshot ramp" just west of Mass. Ave. to allow MassPike drivers to turn around before the Allston tolls. In 2006, a simple turnaround was built in Allston instead of this nutty scheme. David Bryson's illustration mocks what might have been.

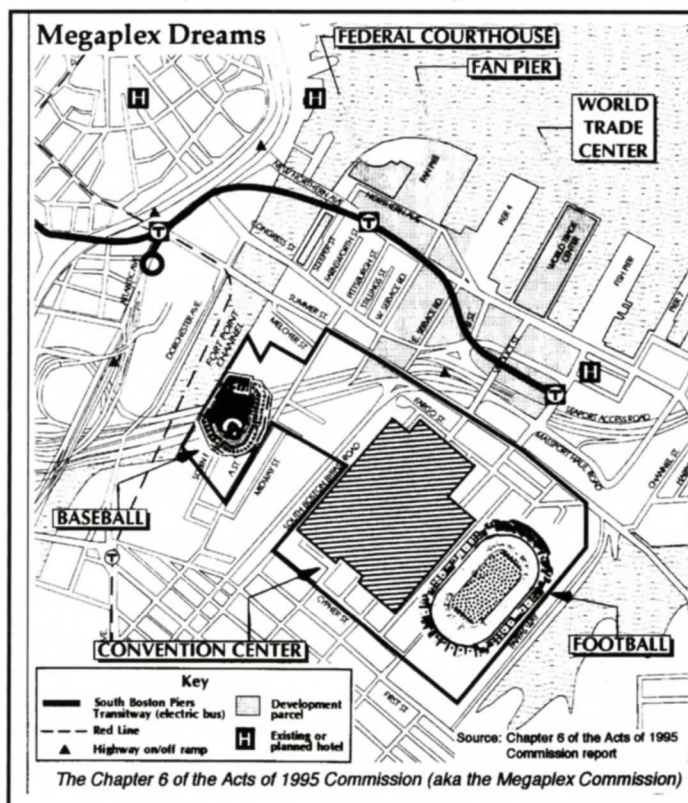


Boston Informer University

Before the time when you could while away the hours searching Google, The Boston Informer periodically provided unique educational tidbits, busted myths and explained concepts that come up in talk about urban issues. We also agree with Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, "...a page of history is worth a volume of logic," and we did our part to explain the history of planning and design decisions as many left a big mark on Boston even 50+ years later.

The debate over what to do with the **land created after the elevated Central Artery was removed** was fueled by exaggerated claims about the proposed parks too be built. The Informer analysis in 2002 revealed the parcels would be relatively small and broken by cross streets, and that the little-discussed Bremen Street Central Artery park in East Boston is actually bigger than all downtown parcels combined.

"**What Might Have Been**" in 2003 opened with John Lennon's quote, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans," and contrasted master planning efforts of the past with 1990s and 2000s BRA "planning" processes. Ten plans were reviewed, from the Southwest Expressway in 1948 to UMass in Copley Square to Megaplex to World Trade Center developer John Drew's elevated people mover to the Seaport, and showed what might have been.



The proposed South Boston Megaplex would have housed convention center, baseball and football.

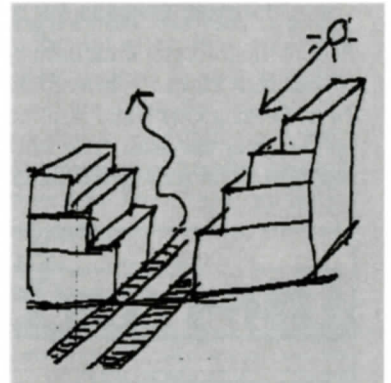
Boston's crazy transportation and building patterns leave many asking, "**I was wondering....**" The Informer in 2004 provided answers to questions about why the Common has no trees on the Charles Street side, why the third Harbor Tower was not built and why there's a median on Boylston opposite the Heritage on the Garden, among others.

A development boom in 2006 led us to write "**Towers in Boston**" chronicling the history of towers in Boston (Custom House Tower in 1915 and old John Hancock in 1947) and how a lack of planning led to a lot of negative impacts, especially at the ground level.

Lack of progress on the transportation funding crisis led us to devote 1 1/2 pages to the **2007 Transportation Finance Commission** reports and comment on 15 of the 28 Commission recommendations that could save the transportation system in Mass.

When the Commonwealth joined the rest of the country and created a "**Dept. of Transportation**" on Nov. 1, 2009, the Informer was ready with an organization chart and critique of the "reform without revenue" approach that continues today.

Our 2010 "**Urban Design Primer**" includes management guru Peter Drucker's warning that, "Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work." The primer on urban design contrasts Burnham-type broad, civic-centered planning by the public sector to urban design plans linked to private redevelopment plans. The primer describes the basic urban design principles that guide development design controls, height, floor-area ratio, setbacks and sun and shadow.



Setbacks were conceived to ensure light and air reached the lower levels.

The Informer's look back, "**Five Decades Ago**," in 2012 included razing Wood Island Park in East Boston; Harbor Towers was under construction on the waterfront, Kevin White became mayor in 1968 at age 38; rent control was enacted; and service on the A Line trolley to Brighton was suspended.

We welcomed a select few **guest columnists** to pen articles, people with truly unique perspectives. When ace transportation and real estate reporter Tom Palmer left The Boston Globe's in 2008, we



1969: Proposed three-tower Harbor Towers

were thrilled to print his "A Journalist Looks Back" guest column in which he shared some opinions about the development process in Boston. Chan Rogers, P.E., World War II veteran, Central Artery builder and remover, and lover of cities, wrote his "The Big Dig: Was it Worth It?" column for the Informer's 15th anniversary to remind us how incredible the Central Artery/Tunnel Project was and the transformative effect it had on Boston despite cost overruns, corruption, disruption and leaks.

You can always use Google to find out about things you want to know, but you often don't know what you need to know. The Boston Informer was glad to provide it.